

What Does it Take to Break the Silence in Teams

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What Does it Take to Break the Silence in Teams: Authentic Leadership and/or Proactive Followership?

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Leadership may help break the silence in teams, but this may not be equally true for all employees. Using behavioral plasticity theory, we propose that authentic leadership—a set of leadership behaviors through which leaders enact their true selves—reduces silence and motivates speaking up in employees low on proactive personality, but hardly affects employees who are proactive by nature, because proactive employees are less susceptible to social influences. Using data from 223 employees (nested in 45 work teams), we indeed find authentic leadership to reduce silence in employees with less proactive personalities, but not in more proactive employees. We discuss theoretical and practical implications for silence and authentic leadership.

INTRODUCTION

On the evening of 8 January 1989, a British Midland Boeing 737 crashed in England. The plane was on its way from London to Belfast when one of the fan blades in the left engine broke, setting the engine on fire. Tragically, the captain and first officer wrongly believed the source of the fire to be the right engine, and turned it off. Forty-seven people lost their lives and 74 were seriously injured in the resulting crash. As became known later, some of the passengers and cabin attendants had been puzzled about why the right engine had

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been turned off. However, this information was not communicated to the pilots because cabin attendants “did not want to undermine the pilots’ authority”, said the surviving purser (Air Accident Investigation Branch [AAIB], 1990; Bienefeld & Grote, 2014).

This example admittedly is an extreme illustration of organisational failure due to employee silence but certainly no exception. There are plenty of other, more mundane examples of how dangers were overlooked when employees remained silent in spite of the fact that they had something to say (Morrison, 2014; Parker & Collins, 2010). Consistent with several recent studies (e.g. Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009; Morrison, 2011), we define employee silence as the intentional withholding of input (e.g. ideas, suggestions, concerns) about potentially important work issues from persons with the perceived authority to act. As such, silence describes an intentional form of non-communication that employees engage in although they have something to say. Employees may choose to remain silent about various issues at work, such as safety concerns, organisational performance problems, disagreement with company policies, and fairness issues (e.g. Brinsfield, 2013; Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003).

Given the potentially severe consequences of silence, the question arises: What can organisations do to prevent employees from remaining silent? As research on leadership has demonstrated, leaders play a critical role in encouraging employees to speak up, and the more open, fair, and respectful leaders are, the less likely employees are to remain silent (Janssen & Gao, 2015; Morrison, 2014; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012). In this paper, we seek to further our understanding of how leadership—in concert with dispositional factors—influences silence at work. Specifically, we argue that employees are more likely to speak up the more they perceive their supervisor to engage in authentic leadership, which involves a set of leadership behaviors through which leaders enact their true selves (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). In addition, drawing from behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1988), we suggest that the effectiveness of authentic leadership might be contingent on follower proactive personality. Behavioral plasticity theory posits that people differ in their susceptibility to environmental forces. Consistent with this view, we propose that proactive employees, who, by definition, have a disposition towards initiative (Bateman & Crant, 1993), are less responsive to authentic leadership behaviors than employees low on proactive personality.

In developing our arguments, we not only rely on research on employee silence but also draw from findings on employee voice. Employee voice describes an informal and discretionary form of employee upward communication intended to bring about improvement or change (e.g. Morrison, 2014). As such, employee voice challenges the organisational status quo—the

generally accepted practices, policies, and systems within an organisation (see Burris, 2012; Gao, Janssen, & Shi, 2011). Challenging the status quo, although constructive in intent, involves risks as it may upset powerful others. Silence and voice are distinct but related constructs and both form part of a broader group of behaviors that involve the expression or suppression of communication, such as upward voice, issue selling, whistleblowing, self-censorship, and employee silence (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008a). Given these similarities, we draw from both silence and voice literatures in developing our hypotheses.

We make two specific contributions to the literature. First, we present a theoretical account and empirical test of how employees' proactive personality moderates the effects of authentic leadership. Although we are not the first to use behavioral plasticity theory in the context of silence and voice (see LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), there is hardly any scholarship that has integrated behavioral plasticity theory, leadership theory, and research on silence and voice (or related constructs, such as organisational citizenship behavior). Avey, Palanski, and Walumbwa (2011) provide one exception to this trend as they used behavioral plasticity theory to predict the effects of ethical leadership. As expected, they found a stronger relationship between ethical leadership and organisational citizenship behaviors in employees with low self-esteem (as compared to employees with high self-esteem). In this paper, we make some further progress in this direction by using behavioral plasticity theory to predict how proactive personality moderates the leadership–silence association. In doing so, we extend the reach of behavioral plasticity theory to the domain of proactivity by studying the moderating effect of proactive personality, which differs from prior research which has focused on self-evaluative beliefs (e.g. self-esteem, self-efficacy).

Second, we draw from an interactionist perspective to empirically assess how dispositional characteristics and situational factors jointly influence employee silence (Morrison, 2011; Pervin, 1989). We thereby contribute to a small but growing body of research studying how leadership and employee characteristics interactively influence employee silence (e.g. Morrison, See, & Pan, 2015). Morrison et al. (2015), for instance, found employees with a low sense of power to be more likely to remain silent, but this effect was weaker when leaders were perceived to be open to input, suggesting that leadership may be a critical factor that alters the effects of employees' personal characteristics on silence. To advance this line of thought, we assess whether authentic leadership interacts with employee characteristics in predicting employee silence. In so doing, our study not only responds to calls in the literature to account for employee and leadership characteristics simultaneously when predicting silence (see Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012), but also helps advance the authentic leadership literature. At this point, we know relatively little about how the effects of authentic leadership vary across situations (for an exception, see Monzani, Ripoll, & Peiró, 2015), and calls to address this issue have gone

largely unheeded (Gardner et al., 2011; Mumford & Fried, 2014). As basically any behavior is situation-specific (Mumford & Fried, 2014), we expect the same to be true for authentic leadership. By identifying boundary conditions, it becomes possible to further increase precision in the predictions derived from authentic leadership theory.

To test our model on how authentic leadership and proactive personality interact to influence silence, we used a cross-sectional field study incorporating 223 employees from 45 work teams. We argue that employees will tend to remain silent if they perceive their supervisor to lead in inauthentic ways. Hence, we study authentic leadership at the individual level and build a level-1 interaction model to test our assumption that authentic leadership and proactive personality interact in their influence on employee silence. In doing so, we examine two related questions, that is, *how* authentic leadership associates with employee silence, and *when* authentic leadership is more or less effective in reducing silence among employees working in teams.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Employee Silence and Authentic Leadership

A number of studies have investigated the link between leadership and silence or voice (Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Treviño, 2010; Edmondson, 2003; Hsiung, 2012; Janssen & Gao, 2015; Liu, Tangirala, & Ramanujam, 2013; Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Edmondson (2003), for instance, studied healthcare teams and found that surgeons in the role of team leaders motivated voice by downplaying power differences in the team. In other studies, authors found voice to be positively associated with perceptions that: (a) leaders solicit and listen to suggestions (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012); (b) input receives fair and respectful treatment from leaders (Janssen & Gao, 2015); and (c) one's supervisor is a transformational, ethical, or authentic leader (Avey, Wernsing, & Palanski, 2012; Hsiung, 2012; Liu et al., 2010).

Theoretically, it is for three reasons that leadership behavior has such strong impact on employees and their decision to speak up (i.e. to engage in a potentially risky behavior) or remain silent (i.e. to evade potential interpersonal risks) (Detert & Burris, 2007; Frazier & Bowler, 2015). First, leaders, by definition, are the target of voice (as they possess the authority to address issues that employees raise). Second, leaders control resources and decide about changes to the status quo (Chiaburu, Lorinkova, & Van Dyne, 2013). Third, leaders have the power to reward and punish subordinates (Detert & Burris, 2007). It is for these reasons that employees are less likely to remain silent when leaders signal to employees "that they are interested in and willing to act on subordinate voice" (Detert & Burris, 2007, p. 870). Whenever leaders fail to send those

signals, subordinates may think of speaking up as too risky, and, thus, remain silent. Here, we argue that authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008) is one way whereby leaders convey such signals that encourage speaking up in employees.

Authentic leaders “are persons who . . . know who they are, what they believe and value, and act upon these values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others” (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004, p. 802). In short, authentic leaders “enact their true selves” (Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015, p. 1678). Authentic leadership cannot simply be described as authenticity, because authentic leadership describes a form of influence through which leadership and followership are realised (Gardner et al., 2011). For instance, leaders who are true to themselves act in accordance with their values, tell employees the hard truth, and openly admit their own mistakes (Leroy et al., 2015).

More formally, authentic leadership is defined as a “pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94). That is, authentic leadership is composed of four dimensions, namely self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalised moral perspective. Together, these dimensions can explain why authentic leadership helps reduce silence in employees.

Self-awareness describes the degree to which one knows oneself and owns that self; self-awareness provides a foundation for authenticity because without knowing the self, one cannot be true to the self. Relational transparency implies that the leader presents his or her true self to followers (and not a distorted, fake self) (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This involves expressing one’s thoughts and emotions openly and sharing information that often is personal with others (Amos & Klimoski, 2014). Balanced processing implies that leaders seek to account for all available information in a balanced way; that is, without ego-based defense mechanisms getting in the way of managerial decision-making (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Leaders who process information in a balanced way also actively solicit information that challenges their own preferences or deeply held positions (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). Authentic leaders also self-regulate their behavior and make decisions guided by deep-rooted personal values, moral reasoning, and ethical standards (i.e. internalised moral perspective) (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Gardner et al. (2005) argued that members will develop trust in those leaders who make decisions in a manner that is self-reflective (i.e. high self-awareness), transparent (i.e. high relational transparency), and reflects an internalised moral perspective. The more employees trust their leaders, the less likely they

should be to remain silent at work (Hsiung, 2012). In addition, by questioning their own deeply held positions when making decisions (i.e. balanced processing), authentic leaders can send a strong signal to employees that they value open communication. Balanced processing also implies that leaders may encourage (positive and negative) feedback from subordinates as such feedback allows the development of a more accurate understanding of situations, tasks, and relationships (see Diddams & Chang, 2012). Thus, to the extent that leaders question their positions and update their own interpretations of workplace events (i.e. engage in balanced processing), employees should feel less concerned about speaking up against the status quo.

Taken together, these authentic leadership behaviors signal to employees that leaders value their input; employees, in turn, will be less likely to perceive speaking up as risky or futile. Support for this view also comes from the literature on psychological safety, which describes individuals' "perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks" (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 23). When psychological safety is low, employees fear that they will be reprimanded if taking interpersonal risks; thus, they will play it safe, for instance, by suppressing novel ideas or concerns (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Leaders can do much to make employees feel (psychologically) safer at work, as research shows (Bienefeld & Grote, 2014; Detert & Burris, 2007). For instance, to the extent that leaders engage in behaviors that indicate openness to employee input, psychological safety increases, which, in turn, stimulates voice behavior (Detert & Burris, 2007). This finding relates to authentic leadership because authentic leaders seek input that not only supports but also challenges their viewpoints (i.e. balanced processing); in doing so, authentic leaders demonstrate openness to novel ideas. Bienefeld and Grote (2014), from studying air-crew members, found psychological safety to mediate the association between leader inclusiveness (i.e. leader behaviors meant to invite employee contributions) and speaking up. This finding is important for our research given that leader inclusiveness and authentic leadership, while distinct, are likely to share conceptual similarities.

Although these findings indicate that authentic leadership and silence are associated, empirical evidence on the link is sparse. The only exceptions to this are Wong, Spence Laschinger, and Cummings (2010) and Hsiung (2012). Wong et al. (2010), studying 280 nurses in Ontario, did not test for a direct effect but found a positive, albeit weak, indirect effect between authentic leadership and voice behavior. Hsiung (2012) studied 404 real estate agents in 70 work teams from Taiwan and found a positive direct effect of authentic leadership on voice behavior. Given that Hsiung (2012) focused on a single organisation, questions about the generalisability of this finding remain. Specifically, the norms around silence and voice may be different in a real estate organisation as compared to firms active in other industrial sectors (see Morrison et al., 2015). In order to advance knowledge that goes beyond this finding from the

real estate industry, and consistent with theoretical arguments (e.g. Detert & Burris, 2007), we propose that authentic leadership is negatively related to employee silence.

We study the leadership–silence association at the individual level, which is consistent with our theory and existing practice in the authentic leadership literature (Gill & Caza, 2015). The majority of authentic leadership studies have investigated how individuals respond to “personalized authentic leadership” (Gill & Caza, 2015, p. 4). Instead of assuming that a leader behaves in essentially the same manner towards each member of a team, a personalised approach takes into account that leaders may treat followers differently (see Graen & Scandura, 1987). Thus, authentic leadership, here, refers to the perceived leadership behavior directed at individual members of a team, and not to common behaviors directed at the team as a whole (see also Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Janssen & Gao, 2015). That we study how employees perceive and report authentic leadership aligns with the more general principle that people tend to act on the basis of their perceptions of reality, rather than on reality per se (Lewin, 1936). If followers perceive supervisors to lead in inauthentic ways they will tend to remain silent, because “leader influence rests ultimately on what subordinates perceive their leaders to have done or been like” (Detert & Burris, 2007, p. 881). Accordingly, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1: Authentic leadership is negatively associated with silence.

Behavioral Plasticity Theory

So far, we have argued for a direct negative relationship between authentic leadership and silence. Scholars, however, have begun to question the view that authentic leadership is universally beneficial, and have called for studies into the boundary conditions of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011). Individuals often react differently to similar circumstances (Saks & Ashforth, 2000), which may imply that not every employee is equally susceptible to the signals that authentic leaders send. Following this line of argumentation, we draw from behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1983, 1988) to develop a rationale for how follower characteristics moderate the association of authentic leadership and silence.

Behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1983, 1988) suggests that individuals differ in the extent to which they respond to social influences, such as their team leader’s behavior. Behavioral plasticity theory explains these inter-individual differences by differences in self-esteem, that is, “the degree of positive self-worth that an individual ascribes to him or herself” (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998, p. 856). More specifically, behavioral plasticity theory predicts that individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to situational influences (social cues) than

individuals with high-self-esteem (Brockner, 1988). This is, for example, because employees low on self-esteem are less certain of their own beliefs and, thus, turn more towards others for guidance. Examples of social cues from the work environment include co-worker behavior, socialisation tactics, and supervisors' leadership behaviors (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Rank, Nelson, Allen, & Xu, 2009). We acknowledge that not all research confirms predictions based on behavioral plasticity theory (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). For instance, LePine and Van Dyne (1998) found support for behavioral plasticity theory when investigating the moderating effect of global self-esteem (in conjunction with two situational factors—group size and style of management), but failed to find support when testing for the moderating effect of satisfaction with the group. As a matter of fact, LePine and Van Dyne's (1998) findings were the opposite of what they had predicted; the more satisfied employees were, the more susceptible to situational factors they were. Still, the majority of research supports behavioral plasticity theory and its basic premise that low self-esteem individuals react more strongly than high self-esteem individuals to social cues from the work environment (Gibson, 2001; Pierce, Gardner, Dunham, & Cummings, 1993). This premise appears to hold independently of whether the "work characteristics are good (a supportive supervisor) or bad (role conflict)" (Pierce et al., 1993, p. 283).

Proactive Personality as a Moderating Factor

Although initially focused on self-esteem, behavioral plasticity theory has also been used in reference to other individual difference variables, such as satisfaction with the group (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998) and—most often—self-efficacy (Gibson, 2001; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Here, we suggest that behavioral plasticity theory also applies to explain how proactive personality, instead of self-esteem or self-efficacy, moderates the effects of social influences such as leadership behaviors.

Proactive personality describes an employee "who is relatively unconstrained by situational forces, and who effects environmental change" (Bateman & Crant, 1993, p. 105). Thus, like individuals with high self-esteem or self-efficacy, proactive employees are less susceptible to social influences than employees low on proactive personality. Indeed, proactive followers are self-directed (Morrison et al., 2015) and inclined to identify and use opportunities to show initiative and change the status quo (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999). By contrast, employees who are less proactive by disposition are described as more reliant on others and rather passive, and are more likely to be "reactively shaped by environments" (Morrison et al., 2015; Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010, p. 276). We extend behavioral plasticity theory to incorporate proactive personality, and propose less proactive employees to be particularly influenced by authentic leaders, more so than employees who are

proactive by disposition. Authentic leadership should thus be particularly impactful when used on employees with less proactive personalities.

Proactive personality differs from self-efficacy and self-esteem, the two constructs that have been studied most often from a behavioral plasticity theory perspective. Self-efficacy is defined as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Self-esteem indicates the level of positive self-worth that an employee ascribes to him- or herself (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). Although these constructs have in common that they describe personal differences, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, unlike proactive personality, they are self-concept constructs that describe beliefs that individuals hold about themselves. Specifically, self-efficacy and self-esteem are self-evaluative beliefs that can range from very negative to very positive (Schaubroeck, Kim, & Peng, 2012). Unlike these evaluative beliefs, proactive personality is more descriptive in nature and oriented towards action. Specifically, proactive personality describes the propensity for individuals to do something (in proactive ways), whereas self-evaluative beliefs focus on what individuals feel they can do and what they are worth (Cai et al., 2015; Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012).

We propose two reasons to explain the moderating effects of proactive personality. First, proactive employees are self-directed and self-reliant (Li, Chiaburu, Kirkman, & Xie, 2013). The more self-directed employees are, the less sensitive they are to social cues (i.e. authentic leadership), and the more likely they are to decide to remain silent or speak up based on intra-personal states and considerations (Morrison et al., 2015). Conversely, employees who are less proactive by disposition are more susceptible to social cues—in particular those cues that signal risk or lack thereof (see Morrison et al., 2015). For instance, less proactive employees scrutinise the leader’s behavior for signals that it is safe to speak up, such as when authentic leaders question their own preferences. The more signals leaders send that speaking up is safe (e.g. through authentic leadership), the more inclined employees low on proactive personality should be to speak up instead of remaining silent. This is because authentic leadership decreases risk concerns and increases employee self-reliance (i.e. engaging with the social world in an independent, confident manner), which, in turn, should increase speaking up (Hinojosa, McCauley, Randolph-Seng, & Gardner, 2014).

Second, proactive personality should increase personal control—the perception that one has control over one’s work behavior and outcomes (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008b). Li, Fay, Frese, Harms, and Gao (2014) hypothesised and found that employees with a proactive personality experience an increase in job control over time. Presumably, proactive personality predisposes employees to make constructive changes to their work environment, for instance by negotiating idiosyncratic deals and taking career initiatives (Li et al., 2014). The more employees feel in control, the more they believe in their own capacity to address workplace issues effectively by taking change-oriented action (Tangirala &

Ramanujam, 2008b). All else being equal, this implies that less proactive employees will doubt their capacity to effectively influence their work environment because of low perceived control. They are less likely to see a clear connection between their actions and important organisational outcomes, and thus, less likely to self-initiate changes. The behavior of employees low on proactive personality is more contingent upon their leader's behavior. If leaders signal that speaking up is acceptable and expected, employees low on proactive personality are likely to speak up, whereas they would remain silent if leaders failed to send such signals. Authentic leaders, by inviting input that challenges their own deeply held convictions and by interacting with employees in an honest, open way, signal that employee input is valued, which should motivate less proactive employees to speak up instead of remaining silent (see Morrison et al., 2015). Taken together, we expect employees low on proactive personality, more so than proactive employees, to make their decision on whether to speak up dependent upon the signals that their leader sends. This is because employees low on proactive personality are relatively uncertain about whether voice is safe and effective (Morrison, 2014).

Empirical findings, although scarce, also support our line of argumentation. Li, Harris, Boswell, and Xie (2011) found that developmental feedback from supervisors was more strongly positively associated with helping behavior (another extra-role behavior) for employees with less proactive personalities compared to more proactive employees. More direct evidence comes from Li et al. (2013) who found that less proactive employees take more charge when working under transformational leaders. Although distinct from each other (Parker & Collins, 2010), both taking charge and voice behavior describe change-oriented discretionary behaviors. Thus, based on this set of empirical findings and consistent with behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1988), we expect authentic leadership to influence silence more strongly in less proactive employees compared to more proactive employees.

Hypothesis 2: Proactive personality will moderate the negative relationship between authentic leadership and silence in such ways that the relationship is stronger when proactive personality is low rather than when it is high.

METHODS

Work Context and Sample

The first and second authors asked four of their graduate university students to recruit participants for this study. The students approached team members from several organisations, working in a variety of jobs across industries (e.g. business and personal services, education, government, and healthcare) and

asked them to participate in a study on voice behavior in teams. The following team definition served as a guideline for sampling teams: A team is “a distinguishable set of two or more people who interact dynamically, interdependently, and adaptively toward a common and valued goal/object/mission, who have each been assigned specific roles or functions to perform, and who have a limited life span of membership” (Salas, Dickinson, Converse, & Tannenbaum, 1992, p. 4). The only difference to Salas et al. (1992) was that we decided to focus on those teams that consisted of at least three members (see Moreland, 2010). Forty-seven organisations were contacted, out of which 30 organisations—located in the Netherlands and Belgium and incorporating 65 teams—consented to participate. The contact person within each organisation received an instructional e-mail to be forwarded to team members; in some cases, contact persons provided the e-mail addresses of team members. Respondents were prompted to indicate a pre-given team code on their questionnaire necessary to match team members and teams. Twenty-four organisations eventually provided useable data.

The sample consisted of 274 respondents out of which 41 were team leaders. After deletion of cases with missing values and omission of team leaders, the full sample was 223 respondents (nested in 45 work teams). The average respondent was 36.57 years old ($SD = 10.12$) and had been with the team for an average of 5.22 years ($SD = 3.95$). One hundred and thirty-four were female (60.1%). In terms of education, 3 (1.3%) had a primary school education, 43 (19.3%) had a secondary school education, and 177 (79.4%) had a college or university education. In terms of nationality, 159 respondents were Dutch (71.3%), 63 Belgian (28.3%), and 1 German (0.4%). Respondents worked in teams that on average had 12.52 members ($SD = 6.99$), ranging between 3 and 25 (i.e. sampling frame). The average number of respondents per team was 4.96 ($SD = 4.16$), ranging between 1 and 20 (i.e. sample statistics).¹ To ensure that the relations between authentic leadership and silence would not be restricted to particular industries, we included respondents from different industries, the largest (in terms of respondents) being business and personal services (60.5%), healthcare (18.8%), retail, wholesale, and crafts (5.4%), and hotel, restaurant, and catering (5.4%).

Measures

Data were collected using electronic questionnaires with items rated on a Likert-type rating scale ranging from 1 (“totally disagree” or “never”) to 5

¹ For four of the 45 teams, we only had one respondent. Our results would have remained essentially identical if we had excluded these four teams from the analysis. Further details regarding these analyses can be obtained from the first author. For a discussion on the disadvantages of excluding teams with low participation rates, see Hirschfeld, Cole, Bernerth, and Rizzuto (2013).

(“totally agree” or “always”). Exceptions were the control variables on team members’ demographics, team size, and industry. All scales were carefully translated from English to Dutch, involving extensive discussions of the translated version. The questionnaire was also pilot-tested on six participants to ensure its comprehensibility. Minor adjustments of item wording were necessary (e.g. instead of “boss” we used the label “team leader”).

Silence. We assessed silence, which is the dependent variable in our study, with the five-item scale developed and validated by Detert and Edmondson (2011). The measure is target specific and focuses on silence towards supervisors (in our case team leaders). When studying silence, self-reports arguably provide more accurate information than other-reports because employees themselves know best about instances when they deliberately withheld input (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). Sample items read “I withhold ideas from my team leader for changing inefficient work policies” and “I keep quiet in group meetings about problems with daily routines that hamper performance” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$).

Authentic Leadership. We measured authentic leadership with the 16-item Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) developed and validated by Walumbwa et al. (2008). The ALQ comprises four theoretically related dimensions that reflect the higher-order construct of authentic leadership (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$). The four dimensions are self-awareness (four items), relational transparency (five items), balanced processing (three items), and internalised moral perspective (four items). Sample items include “Seeks feedback to improve interactions with others” (self-awareness), “Admits mistakes when they are made” (relational transparency), “Listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions” (balanced processing), and “Demonstrates beliefs that are consistent with actions” (internalised moral perspective).

Proactive Personality. To assess proactive personality, we used a four-item version of Bateman and Crant’s proactivity measure previously used in Detert and Burris (2007) and Detert and Edmondson (2011). Sample items include “If I see something I don’t like, I fix it” and “I am always looking for better ways to do things” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .66$).

Control Variables. We incorporated several measures as controls to remove the influences of other variables related to silence. As individual-level control variables, we included age, gender, and team tenure. As team-level control variables, we included team size and industry.

At the individual level, we included age of team members because older team members may be less concerned about speaking up than younger, less

experienced, employees (Takeuchi, Chen, & Cheung, 2012). Next, we controlled for gender because prior research suggests that males may speak up more than females (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). For gender we used an individual-level dummy variable (0 = female; 1 = male). In addition, we controlled for team tenure because longer tenured employees may feel more comfortable speaking up (Detert & Burris, 2007).

At the team level, we controlled for team size because individual contributions may be less recognisable in large groups, undermining voice motivation (O'Leary & Mortensen, 2010). Finally, we controlled for industry because innovation and creativity, and thus, voice, may be more important in some industries than in others (Baron & Tang, 2011). We included dummy-coded variables to account for the potential influence of industry characteristics (e.g. government: 1 = yes, 0 = no), using healthcare as reference category. Taken together, we have good reason to believe that these controls associate with our dependent variable (see Becker, 2005).

Data Analysis Approach

The employees in our sample were nested in work teams so that individual-level residuals were non-independent. To explicitly model this non-independence resulting from team membership, we used multilevel modeling (also referred to as random coefficient modeling or mixed-effects modeling; see Preacher, Zhang, & Zyphur, 2011). Multilevel modeling is superior to ordinary least square regression when dealing with clustered data. This is because multilevel analysis explicitly models the within-unit error dependence by estimating error terms both at the team and the individual level (Krull & MacKinnon, 2001). This yields more precise standard error estimates and reduces the chance of erroneously believing artificially inflated effects to be substantial effects.

Note that multilevel modeling is typically used to assess the simultaneous influence of higher- and lower-level variables. In our model, however, all main model variables resided at the individual level. Multilevel analysis is the appropriate analytical tool for testing such single-level models because it allows accounting and adjusting for the non-independence of nested observations (Kenny, Korchmaros, & Bolger, 2003). In other words, we did not focus our analysis on the influence of team membership but instead accounted for it as a possible source of error variance (see Lang, Thomas, Bliese, & Adler, 2007). Corresponding examples in the literature include lower-level moderation models (e.g. Lang et al., 2007) and lower-level mediation models (see Kenny et al., 2003). In particular, we built and tested a lower-level or level-1 moderation model (see Lang et al., 2007). Unlike traditional cross-level interaction models which assess how far a lower-level association is dependent upon a higher-level moderator variable (see Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Culpepper, 2013), we study a

model that assesses the interaction effect of two level-1 predictors (i.e. authentic leadership and proactive personality).

To estimate our models, we used the nlme package in R (version 3.0.2), an open source software well suited for multilevel modeling (Bliese, 2013). We used full maximum likelihood for parameter estimation because this allows comparing models that differ in the fixed part (Hox, 2010). We first built an intercept-only model for the individual-level outcome variable silence that serves as baseline model for subsequent analyses and indicates how much variance in silence resides within and between work teams. Next, we tested for the possibility that the relationship between authentic leadership and silence differed across teams using log-likelihood deviance statistics to compare a (random-intercept) fixed-slope model to a (random-intercept) random-slope model. Third, we entered authentic leadership, proactive personality, and the level-1 interaction of authentic leadership and proactive personality into the equation. Consistent with recommendations in the literature (Mathieu, Aguinis, Culpepper, & Chen, 2012; Zhang, Zyphur, & Preacher, 2009), level-1 predictors were group-mean centered, and the means reintroduced as level-2 predictors. We ran all analyses (except the intercept-only model) while controlling for age, gender, team tenure, team size, and industry. We grand-mean centered those control variables for which no meaningful zero point existed, that is, age, team tenure, and team size.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for our study variables are depicted in Table 1. Bivariate correlation results show a negative correlation of authentic leadership and silence, and a negative association of proactive personality and silence.

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations^a

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Silence	1.81	0.58	.80				
2. Proactive personality	3.86	0.48	-.26**	.66			
3. Authentic leadership	3.59	0.53	-.31**	.13*	.91		
4. Age	36.57	10.12	-.00	-.09	-.07		
5. Team size	12.52	6.99	-.07	-.16*	.01	-.08	
6. Team tenure	5.22	6.20	.01	-.11	-.10	.46**	.03

Note: ^a*n* = 223 individuals (nested in 45 teams). Cronbach's α are reported in boldface along the diagonal.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Fixed Effects Estimates (Top) and Variance-Covariance Estimates (Bottom) for
Moderation Models Predicting Silence^a

<i>Level and Variable</i>	<i>Intercept-only</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Level 1				
Intercept	1.82 (0.05)	1.96 (0.09)	1.97 (0.09)	1.95 (0.09)
Age		−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)
Gender		0.03 (0.08)	0.06 (0.08)	0.08 (0.08)
Team tenure		−0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)
Authentic leadership		−0.26** (0.09)	−0.24** (0.09)	−0.30** (0.09)
Proactive personality			−0.29** (0.08)	−0.27** (0.08)
Level 2				
Retail, wholesale and crafts		−0.09 (0.19)	−0.14 (0.18)	−0.11 (0.18)
Hotel and catering		−0.18 (0.20)	−0.14 (0.19)	−0.14 (0.19)
Government		−0.03 (0.23)	−0.06 (0.22)	−0.03 (0.22)
Education		−0.03 (0.23)	−0.01 (0.22)	−0.02 (0.22)
Business and personal services		−0.25* (0.11)	−0.28* (0.10)	−0.27* (0.10)
Other		0.15 (0.25)	0.10 (0.24)	0.13 (0.24)
Team size		−0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)
Authentic leadership (team mean)		−0.45** (0.12)	−0.37** (0.12)	−0.38** (0.11)
Proactive personality (team mean)			−0.36 (0.19)	−0.34 (0.19)
Interaction				
Proactive personality (L1) * Authentic leadership (L1)				0.44* (0.21)
Random parameters				
Level 2				
Intercept variance	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.00
Level 1				
Within-team variance	0.30	0.28	0.27	0.26
Additional information				
−2 × log likelihood	384.55	354.39	338.97	334.38
Difference of −2 × log likelihood (df)		30.16** (12)	15.42** (2)	4.60* (1)

Note: ^a*n* = 223 individuals (nested in 45 teams). Healthcare served as reference category when controlling for industry. L1 = level 1.

* *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 shows the results of the multilevel analysis. First, we estimated an intercept-only model for individual silence to assess its within-team and

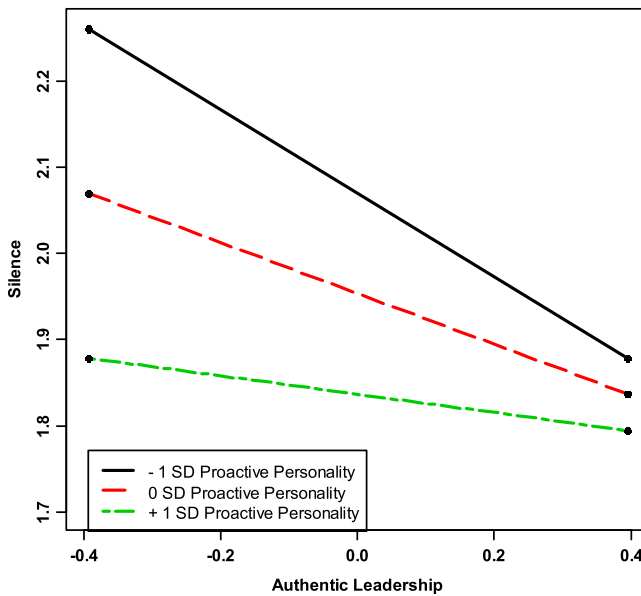


FIGURE 1. Interactive effects of authentic leadership and proactive personality on silence.

between-team variability (see Aguinis et al., 2013). As part of that first step, we computed the ICC(1) value for silence; results showed that $ICC(1) = .111$, indicating that between-team differences accounted for about 11.1 per cent of the total variance in individuals' silence. This finding suggests that multilevel analysis is appropriate because the nesting effect violates the non-independence assumption of ordinary least squares regression (Bliese, 2000).

Next, we ran a random-intercept fixed-slope random coefficients model, including silence and authentic leadership. We found that authentic leadership was negatively and significantly associated with silence ($\gamma = -.26, p < .01$). A random-intercept random-slope model did not improve model fit further ($\Delta -2 \log\text{-likelihood} = 0.00, p = 1$). That we did not find significant slope variance may be due to the fact that slope variance tests have low power, which is why scholars have recommended testing for hypothesised effects "regardless of the significance of slope variance" (LaHuis & Ferguson, 2009, p. 433). We thus carried on in our analysis using a random-intercept fixed-slope model (see Bliese & Britt, 2001).

As shown in Table 2, we found the expected negative association between authentic leadership and silence (Model 1). Hypothesis 1, thus, was supported. Concerning our moderation hypothesis (Model 3), we found authentic leadership to exhibit a significant within-level interaction with proactive personality

($\gamma = .44, p < .05$). To facilitate interpretation, we plotted the interaction at three levels of authentic leadership (+1, 0, and -1 standard deviation; Aiken & West, 1991). We conducted simple slope tests to investigate the exact nature of the interaction (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). We found that authentic leadership is negatively associated with silence for team members low on proactive personality ($\gamma = -0.49; z = -3.31; p < .01$) and for moderately proactive members ($\gamma = -0.30; z = -3.14; p < .01$). However, for highly proactive team members, authentic leadership is unrelated to silence ($\gamma = -0.11; z = -0.93; p = .35$).

Figure 1 suggests that the negative association of authentic leadership and silence decreases when proactive personality increases up to the point that the relationship becomes insignificant (i.e. when proactive personality is high). This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 2. Figure 1 also suggests that employees— independent of their proactive personality—are unlikely to remain silent when authentic leadership is high.

DISCUSSION

What is it that explains why employees oftentimes choose silence over voice? Interactionist reasoning would suggest that the answer to this question lies at the crossing of dispositional factors and external social influences (Pervin, 1989). A more specific prediction can be developed by relying on behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1988). We proposed that employees who score low on proactive personality are especially susceptible to environmental factors, such as social influence attempts of their leaders. Because of its emphasis on developing and enacting one's truthful, authentic self, we focused on authentic leadership, arguing that the signals that authentic leaders send would negatively associate with silence in employees, but, consistent with behavioral plasticity theory, we expected this association to be particularly strong in employees low on proactive personality. Our empirical findings on 223 employees from 45 work teams support this line of reasoning. Employees who were proactive by nature spoke up regardless of the level of authentic leadership behavior displayed by team leaders; employees low on proactive personality, instead, were more likely to speak up when led by an authentic leader.

Theoretical Implications

As expected, we found a significant, negative association between authentic leadership and employee silence. This finding aligns with the positive association that Hsiung (2012) established for authentic leadership and voice behavior. Our cross-industry study suggests that the beneficial effects of authentic leadership are not exclusive to specific industries—remember that Hsiung (2012) studied voice behavior among real estate agents exclusively. In addition, our findings go beyond prior studies that have identified positive links between

voice behavior and management openness (Detert & Burris, 2007), LMX (Liu et al., 2013), and manager's consultation (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012). The finding that authentic leadership is negatively associated with silence is important because we cannot infer that those leadership behaviors that increase voice equally decrease silence. This is because employees may speak up on certain issues while withholding other ideas and suggestions because of self-protective motives (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

The primary contribution of our study, though, is probably the development and use of an interactionist framework that helps predict silence in employees. Scholars have made tremendous progress in identifying leadership behaviors that reduce tendencies to remain silent, including authentic leadership (Detert & Burris, 2007; Detert & Treviño, 2010; Edmondson, 2003; Hsiung, 2012; Janssen & Gao, 2015; Liu et al., 2010; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Scholars have also discovered numerous dispositional factors that associate with silence, including proactive personality (e.g. Crant, Kim, & Wang, 2011; Tangirala, Kamdar, Venkataramani, & Parke, 2013). However, only a relatively small set of studies has ventured into investigating the interactive effects of leadership and employee characteristics on employee silence and voice (Detert & Burris, 2007; Janssen & Gao, 2015; Morrison et al., 2015). We contribute to this small but growing body of research by examining proactive personality in conjunction with authentic leadership. That we found silence in employees to decrease when low (or medium) proactive personality was paired with authentic leadership, but not when proactive personality was high, suggests that authentic leadership and (high) proactive personality tend to act as substitutes (Dionne, Yammarino, Howell, & Villa, 2005). If followers are highly disposed towards proactivity, they tend to speak up consistently, rendering the signals that authentic leaders send less effective (Morrison et al., 2015). Authentic leadership, however, remains impactful for those followers who are less proactive by nature.

This finding is not only important to scholars studying silence and voice, but also has implications for authentic leadership theory. Although the beneficial effects of authentic leadership are well documented (see Gardner et al., 2011), the number of studies on potential moderators of these effects has remained low. Scholars, more recently, have called for research into the boundary conditions of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011; Mumford & Fried, 2014; Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008); these calls, however, have gone largely unheeded (for exceptions, see Monzani et al., 2015; Wang, Sui, Luthans, Wang, & Wu, 2014). This is problematic because, as Gardner et al. (2011) observe, it seems necessary to establish boundary conditions on authentic leadership in order to help realise authentic leadership's full theoretical potential. Our results suggest that proactive personality acts as a boundary condition for the authentic leadership–silence link. Our main effect results confirm authentic leadership's effectiveness, but

our moderation analysis suggests that authentic leadership is less impactful vis-à-vis followers who, by nature, are disposed towards initiating change and challenging the status quo (because they tend to speak up anyway). To fully understand the importance of authentic leadership, more research into its boundary conditions seems critical.

Finally, our research extends the reach of behavioral plasticity theory by showing its applicability to proactive personality and silence. Previous research has mainly focused on self-evaluative beliefs (i.e. self-esteem, self-efficacy), showing those employees with lower self-evaluative beliefs to be more susceptible (more plastic) to situational influences (such as influence attempts from leaders) (Gibson, 2001; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Although the same should hold for individuals low on proactive personality, albeit for different reasons, ours is the first study to use behavioral plasticity theory to develop predictions regarding the moderating effects of proactive personality. We advance theory in finding that behavioral plasticity theory applies to proactive personality, that is, a rather descriptive and action-oriented personality disposition. If this view is correct, scholars should find similar results for other action-oriented personality dispositions such as learning goal orientation and low risk aversion (e.g. Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999). Li et al. (2013) provide indirect evidence for this idea; they found learning goal orientation to attenuate the positive relationship between transformational leadership and taking charge. Further research along these lines—and research accounting for evaluative self-beliefs and personality traits simultaneously—seems promising.

Overall, we believe that behavioral plasticity theory provides a parsimonious framework for predicting the (interactive) effects of proactive personality on silence. Perhaps the fact that LePine and Van Dyne (1998) only found partial support for their plasticity-based arguments on voice behavior (i.e. behavioral plasticity theory accurately predicted the effects of self-esteem but not satisfaction with the group) has prevented others from making operational behavioral plasticity theory for the research on silence and voice. We hope that our study inspires others to venture further into discovering other dispositions that help predict why silence is susceptible to leadership in some employees but not in others.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study is subject to some limitations that offer future research possibilities. To measure our predictors and outcome variables, we relied solely on self-reports of employees, raising common method concerns (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Still, our sense is that common method bias is a rather unlikely explanation for our findings. First, moderation effects are robust to common method variance (Evans, 1985; Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira,

2010) and Siemsen et al. (2010) concluded from their analysis that when finding a significant interaction effect “researchers can be confident that they are not the result of CMV [common method variance]” (p. 472). Second, we doubt that common method variance is a likely explanation for the authentic leadership–silence relationship. We followed recommendations from the literature to ameliorate common source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), that is, we interspersed other variables between the measures of interest and reduced respondents’ apprehension by allowing their answers to be anonymous. We also heeded advice from Conway and Lance (2010) who urged authors to provide a clear rationale for why self-reports are appropriate (in order to address common method concerns). We believe that the measures we used are appropriate because they reflect the nature of the constructs under investigation (Conway & Lance, 2010). We studied authentic leadership as perceived by the followers because leadership outcomes depend on the perceptions of followers (see Oc & Bashshur, 2013); we used self-reports to study silence because this describes a “private suppressive communicative behavior” (Tangirala & Ramamujam, 2008a, p. 62) which cannot really be observed from the outside. In all, common method bias should not pose a serious concern for the conclusions drawn from our findings. Still, future research could include observer ratings to see how far they may predict variance in silence above and beyond self-reports alone.

Next, we collected our data at one point in time instead of establishing temporal precedence of authentic leadership relative to silence. Hence, we cannot rule out the possibility of reverse causality entirely. Perhaps the degree to which team members remain silent influences the behavior of their team leaders? Although conceivable, it seems rather unlikely that individual silence would explain the overall degree of authentic leadership exhibited by a team leader, and theory and empirical work supports the direction tested in this study (Detert & Burris, 2007). Still, given that most studies on the topic are cross-sectional, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that silence and voice influence leadership. Cross-lagged analysis appears necessary to increase our confidence about the direction of influence.

Furthermore, the coefficient alpha of our four-item measure of proactive personality was slightly lower than the conventionally accepted cutoff value of .70 (i.e. Cronbach’s $\alpha = .66$). Note, however, that Schmitt (1996) suggested that a low alpha value reduces the observed relationship which reduces chances of finding a statistically significant effect. Also, the fact that we used a four-item measure may have contributed to the somewhat lower Cronbach’s alpha because alpha partially depends on test length. Given that we relied on an accepted scale (Detert & Edmondson, 2011) and that the low alpha may attenuate our findings, we believe that our results are sufficiently robust (DeRue, Conlon, Moon, & Willaby, 2009). Still, scholars who wish to investigate the role of proactive personality in the context of voice and silence may

want to consider using the 10-item version of the proactive personality scale (Seibert et al., 1999).

More recently, scholars have suggested that silence and voice describe multifaceted behaviors (e.g. Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Although our one-dimensional conceptualisation of silence aligns with the majority of research, it will be important to test whether and how different facets of silence (e.g. acquiescent and defensive silence) associate with leadership. Developing and testing how different kinds of silence associate with different types of leadership may help to develop a better understanding of why and when employees speak up or remain silent (Liang et al., 2012). This may also involve modeling the reasons why employees remain silent (e.g. belief that voice is risky or that voice is ineffectual), which, in turn, would allow organisations to develop more effective strategies for dealing with silence (Brinsfield, 2013).

Another issue worth discussing is that we treated authentic leadership as a direct cause of the ALQ measures, which is consistent with the reflective measurement model along which the majority of leadership measures have been developed (Kalthoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011). We believe this decision to be well justified especially against the backdrop of recent criticism of alternative, formative measurement models (Aguinis & Edwards, 2014; Edwards, 2011). Alternatively, it might be possible to conceptualise the component dimensions of authentic leadership as reflective and the higher-order construct as formative, as Avolio and Walumbwa (2014) suggested. In line with others (Edwards, 2011), we acknowledge the potential that this suggestion offers and call for research into these complex but important measurement issues.

While our study highlights the importance of authentic leadership in reducing silence in employees with less proactive personalities, there are also studies which show that leaders' positive affect encourages employee voice (see Liu, Song, Li, & Liao, 2015). Thus, an interesting question arises regarding whether authentic leaders who display positive affect at the cost of authenticity can reduce employee silence (see Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009). Possibly, authentic leadership may lose some of its positive influence if positive affect is displayed but not felt, or worse, may backfire, as inconsistencies from leaders can breed distrust (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). If, however, leaders displayed positive affect in an effort to remain true to the self, authentic leadership might actually be more, not less, beneficial in terms of employee voice (see Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012). This would be an interesting avenue for future research.

In addition, it seems relevant to assess whether behavioral plasticity theory also helps predict the effects of other kinds of leadership (e.g. transformational leadership) on voice and silence. Theoretically speaking, we have no reason to believe that the effects that we established apply to authentic leadership only.

However, further empirical evidence is needed before drawing any firm conclusions on whether and how behavioral plasticity theory may serve to predict the interactive effects of proactive personality and other types of leadership.

Finally, we see a chance to develop a more nuanced understanding of how and why challenging the status quo of an organisation is potentially risky. As a starting point, we would suggest a more refined conceptualisation of the term status quo. For instance, research has left unspecified the quality of the status quo. This is surprising because it should matter (e.g. in terms of motivation and performance evaluation) whether employees question a functional status quo or a status quo that is rather unproductive from an organisational perspective. It may also matter whether the status quo describes a long-established, commonly agreed upon state of things or whether the status quo has only recently been adopted and is ambiguous and/or disputed (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Schaub, 2004). Acquiring more knowledge on the status quo that is being challenged by employees may well generate novel insights into voice and silence. We leave this for future research.

Practical Implications

Our research offers useful insights for practitioners. For leaders, our findings imply that authentic leadership will be more impactful when working with less proactive employees. When working with highly proactive employees, authentic leaders may feel somewhat redundant, because those employees tend to speak up regardless of authentic leadership. From this it follows that authentic leaders should rather channel their efforts towards those employees who are less proactive by disposition. It is for these followers that authentic leadership really makes a difference.

Still, the fact that not all leaders are authentic leaders begs the following question: What can organisations do to encourage voice in employees who are less proactive by disposition and whose supervisors lead in rather inauthentic ways, all else being equal? To encourage voice in those employees, organisations may need to create organisational structures and work environments that are conducive to voice. For instance, less proactive employees may speak up more in teams where responsibilities, priorities, and authority structures are clear. This is because clarity in responsibilities and priorities, among others, makes the work environment more predictable and, thus, helps anticipate the consequences of interpersonal risk-taking, thereby increasing psychological safety, which, in turn, decreases silence (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013; Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010).

In conclusion, our findings reveal that authentic leadership is effective in breaking the silence in teams, especially when leaders work with employees with less proactive personalities. Employees who are proactive by nature do

not need to be nurtured; they will speak up regardless of the authentic leader's behavior.

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